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Soviets said readying disinformation blitz

By Bill Gertz
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A former Soviet bloc intelligence officer said yesterday he believes the Soviet Union is preparing for a massive "disinformation" campaign to discredit the United States if the Soviet Union fails to get the agreement it wants at the November summit meeting.

Ladislav Bittman, a Czech intelligence specialist who defected immediately after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, believes the Soviets are preparing to blame the United States if the Soviets do not get what they want at the meeting between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva.

Mr. Bittman, who teaches communications at an East Coast university under an assumed name, was a specialist in the use of "disinformation" which he described as Soviet covert action to influence and undermine Western societies or individuals.

"Right now Soviet disinformation experts are working very systematically in collecting every piece of available information, facts and documents that could be used immediately after the summit for a disinformation campaign to prove that the United States is responsible for the failure of the summit," Mr. Bittman said in an interview.

He has just written a new book published yesterday by Pergamon-Brassy's called "The KGB and Disinformation: An Insider's View."

If the Soviets reach what they regard as a satisfactory agreement, the disinformation campaign could be canceled, he said.

"But regardless of the outcome, right now they are preparing for that campaign," Mr. Bittman said. "That

means that immediately after the summit they will be ready to orchestrate a worldwide campaign, primarily in the United States and Western Europe, to show that Americans were responsible for it and that Reagan himself is the primary villain."

The Soviets try to manipulate Western media by planting false and misleading information — through forgeries, paid agents and unwitting collaborators — to undermine Western policies, he said.

"Right now Soviet disinformation experts are working ... to prove that the United States is responsible for the failure of the summit," Ladislav Bittman said.

He said disinformation is only one component of "active measures," the covert action programs used to implement Soviet policy goals around the world in concert with Soviet overt propaganda.

The current official propaganda structure is engaged in a campaign to promote a positive image of the Soviet proposals and policies, he said.

"This is also the time of great political danger when the KGB has to be very sensitive because any major intelligence disaster — the defection or arrest of a major agent, or the exposure of an active measure — could damage the image of the Soviet Union," Mr. Bittman said.

A Czechoslovakian intelligence service officer for 14 years, Mr. Bittman was one of the first defectors to provide the West with details of how the Soviets use disinformation. He spent his last two years in Prague directing a team of disinformation specialists who held freewheeling discussions, similar to those of Madison Avenue advertising agents, that led to disinformation proposals.

"It was public relations in reverse," Mr. Bittman said.

Although he ended his intelligence career in 1968 after being debriefed by U.S. intelligence services, Mr. Bittman said he continues to recognize Soviet disinformation programs in the U.S. press.

Mr. Bittman defended the U.S. press for its critical judgment but added: "As a former specialist, I would say there are a number of journalists in the American media that were recruited by the Soviets who work either for various prominent newspapers or for broadcast news media," Mr. Bittman said.

Agents in the media are asked to report stories based on outlines provided by Soviet case officers. Usually, planted stories publicize items that will damage U.S. foreign policy or a particularly anti-Soviet public figure, he said.

He said the Soviets "love forgeries" and used hundreds of forged documents against the West during the 1960s and early 1970s. In the mid-1970s, reports of forgeries declined because during the Watergate scandal forgeries probably were considered counterproductive, he said.

Since the late 1970s, however, the Soviets have stepped up their use of forgeries, he said.

One example of a KGB forgery was a letter criticizing black athletes that was sent to Third World countries just before the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. The letter purportedly was sent by the Ku Klux Klan but was identified by the FBI as a fake.